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FM IRAN RPO DUBAI

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC

INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE

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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000014

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NEA/IR; LONDON FOR GAYLE;
PARIS FOR WALLER; BERLIN FOR PAETZOLD;

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/29/2026

TAGS: IR PREL PGOV PHUM

SUBJECT: IRANIAN ACTIVISTS LAUD US HUMAN RIGHTS PRESSURE, ADVISE
AGAINST IMPOSING DEMOCRACY

REF: RPO DUBAI 0013

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CLASSIFIED BY: JILLIAN BURNS, DIRECTOR, IRAN REGIONAL PRESENCE
OFFICE, DEPARTMENT OF STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (D)

1.(S/NF) SUMMARY: IRAN REGIONAL PRESENCE OFFICERS MET NOVEMBER 22 WITH A GROUP OF PROMINENT DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS, IN DUBAI FOR VISAS FOR A US CONFERENCE ON THE FUTURE OF REFORM IN IRAN. ON ONE HAND, THE ACTIVISTS LAUDED SUPPORT FROM THE US FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN. FORMER POLITICAL PRISONER HASHEM AGHAJARI CITED US PRESSURE, AS WELL AS PRESSURE FROM OTHER SOURCES, AS INSTRUMENTAL IN THE OVERTURNING OF HIS DEATH SENTENCE AND HIS RELEASE FROM PRISON. ON THE OTHER, THEY EXPRESSED CONCERN THE US WOULD TRY TO IMPOSE DEMOCRACY IN IRAN, OR CONVERSELY FORGET ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS IF IT REACHED A DEAL WITH THE CURRENT REGIME. THEY EXPRESSED SUPPORT FOR US CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGE EFFORTS CENTERED IN DUBAI AND ENCOURAGED GREATER US UNDERSTANDING OF IRAN. THEY SAID UPCOMING ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS ELECTIONS CARRY LITTLE IMPORT FOR ELITES AND INTELLECTUALS, BUT POORER IRANIANS ARE LIKELY TO PARTICIPATE. BY CONTRAST, THEY NOTED THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS. THEY NOTED INCREASING LIMITS ON THEIR ACTIVITIES AND THEIR DISAPPOINTMENT IN PRESIDENT KHAMENEI. END SUMMARY.

2.(S/NF) ON NOVEMBER 22, IRPO DIRECTOR AND IRPOFFS MET WITH A GROUP OF FOUR DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS WHO WERE IN DUBAI APPLYING FOR US VISAS. POLITICAL SCIENCE PROFESSOR AND FORMER POLITICAL PRISONER HASHEM AGHAJARI, STUDENT ACTIVIST ABDOLLAH MOMENI, WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST MARZIEH MORTEZA LANGEROUDI, AND JOURNALIST ALIREZA RAJAI (STRICTLY PROTECT ALL NAMES) PLAN TO ATTEND A FEBRUARY 2007 CONFERENCE ON DEMOCRACY AND REFORM, ORGANIZED BY FORMER MP FATEMEH HAGHIGHATJOO AT MIT. WHEN ASKED THE TOPIC OF HIS PRESENTATION, AGHAJARI SAID HE WOULD ADDRESS THE TOPIC OF DEMOCRACY AND RELIGION IN IRAN, AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN REFORM AND DEMOCRACY. (NOTE: RAJAI MADE NO SUBSTANTIVE COMMENTS DURING THE MEETING. ENDNOTE)

GRATEFUL FOR US PRESSURE ON HUMAN RIGHTS, FUTURE CONCERNS

3.(S/NF) WHEN ASKED WHAT HE THOUGHT BROUGHT ABOUT THE OVERTURNING OF HIS DEATH SENTENCE AND HIS RELEASE FROM PRISON IN 2004, AGHAJARI CITED BOTH DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE, INCLUDING FROM THE US, FROM GOVERNMENTS AS WELL AS MASS MEDIA. WHEN ASKED IF HE THOUGHT PRESSURE FROM THE US CAN HAVE A DETRIMENTAL EFFECT ON A HUMAN RIGHTS CASE, HE DISAGREED. NONETHELESS, SEVERAL ACTIVISTS WERE SUSPICIOUS OF THE US

COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS. AGHAJARI FELT THE US APPLIED PRESSURE SELECTIVELY ON THE ISSUE OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND ASKED WHETHER THE US WOULD CONTINUE TO SUPPORT HUMAN RIGHTS IN IRAN IF THE TWO COUNTRIES CAME TO AGREEMENT ON OTHER KEY ISSUES.

IRPO DIRECTOR REITERATED THE US COMMITMENT TO HUMAN RIGHT AND DEMOCRACY, EXPLAINING THAT PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS WILL CONTINUE TO BE A PRIORITY IN US FOREIGN POLICY.

US AND DEMOCRACY IN IRAN

4.(S/NF) WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST LANGEROUDI MAINTAINED THAT HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR THE US SPONSORED 1953 COUP OF PRIME MINISTER MOHAMMAD MOSSADEQ, SHE WOULD BE LIVING TODAY IN A DEMOCRACY. SHE COMMENTED THAT IN A TRUE DEMOCRACY, THE PEOPLE DETERMINE WHAT IS BEST FOR THEM, AND THAT THE ALTERNATIVE, WHERE LEADERS MAKE ALL THE DETERMINATIONS, IS CALLED "SULTANISM." SHE ALSO EXPRESSED SUSPICION THAT US MOTIVES IN IRAQ WERE FOCUSED ON OIL, NOT DEMOCRACY. AGHAJARI ADDED THAT DEMOCRACY SHOULD COME FROM THE PEOPLE OF THE COUNTRY. IRAN IS A RELIGIOUS COUNTRY, LIKE THE US, AND THAT DEMOCRACY IN IRAN MUST HAVE A RELIGIOUS ELEMENT. HE STATED THAT A COMPLETE SECULAR DEMOCRACY WOULD INSULT IRANIANS' RELIGIOUS BELIEFS.

5.(S/NF) AGHAJARI CONTINUED THAT IRANIANS ARE NOT AGAINST THE US AND, AS DEMONSTRATED IN THE PUBLIC OPINION POLL THAT GOT ABBAS ABDI THROWN IN PRISON, THE MAJORITY SUPPORT RESTORATION OF TIES WITH THE US. NONETHELESS, THE IRANIAN PEOPLE ARE PROUD AND WISH TO BE INDEPENDENT AND MAINTAIN THEIR NATIONAL DIGNITY. IRANIANS ARE SUSPICIOUS OF INTERVENTION, HE COMMENTED. HE ADVISED THAT THE US SHOULD NOT TAKE STEPS THAT LOOK LIKE IT WANTS TO INTERVENE OR DICTATE. HE CLAIMED THAT IRANIANS ARE CURRENTLY TESTING THE US, AND THAT IF US POLICIES ARE CONTRADICTORY OR IF IT APPEARS THE US IS DOING THINGS FOR ITS OWN BENEFIT IN THE REGION, THERE WILL BE DISTRUST AND SUSPICION. NOTING THE GREAT IMPORTANCE OF THE NUCLEAR ISSUE, HE SAID THAT UNDERSTANDING WOULD BE GOOD FOR BOTH SIDES, WHILE CONFLICT WOULD BE BAD FOR

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BOTH SIDES. IN GENERAL, HE ADDED, IT WOULD BENEFIT THE US IF THERE WERE AN END TO WAR AND TERROR IN THE REGION AND IF THE REGIONAL COUNTRIES HAD GREATER CAPACITY, RATHER THAN POVERTY.

SUPPORTIVE OF INCREASED FOCUS ON IRAN

6.(S/NF) AGHAJARI EXPRESSED SUPPORT FOR THE IDEA OF DUBAI AS A CENTER FOR US CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGES WITH IRANIANS. HE COMMENTED THAT THE US GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN OUTSIDE OF IRAN FOR OVER 27 YEARS AND SHOULD IMPROVE ITS KNOWLEDGE OF THE COUNTRY. AGHAJARI ASSERTED THAT BETTER US UNDERSTANDING OF IRAN WOULD HELP TO BRING PEACE AND DEMOCRACY IN THE REGION.

POORER IRANIANS MORE LIKELY TO PARTICIPATE IN ELECTIONS

7.(S/NF) REGARDING THE DECEMBER 15 ELECTIONS FOR THE ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS, THE BODY THAT SELECTS AND NOMINALLY SUPERVISES THE SUPREME LEADER, AGHAJARI COMMENTED THAT URBAN ELITES AND INTELLECTUALS DO NOT TAKE THE ELECTIONS SERIOUSLY. ON THE OTHER HAND, PARTICIPATION IS LIKELY TO BE HIGHER AMONG THE LOWER CLASSES, WHO TEND TO BE MORE RELIGIOUS. AGHAJARI NOTED THAT ALTHOUGH THE ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS ELECTIONS HOLD LITTLE IMPORTANCE, THE MUNICIPAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS ARE OF SOME SIGNIFICANCE. THE COUNCILS HAVE GREATER PUBLIC SUPPORT THAN THAT ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS, HE NOTED, AND FOR THIS REASON THE GOVERNMENT HELD THE ELECTIONS FOR BOTH BODIES CONCURRENTLY, IN A BID TO INCREASE VOTER PARTICIPATION. AGHAJARI COMMENTED THAT REFORMISTS ARE UNLIKELY TO PARTICIPATE IN THE ELECTIONS BUT MADE NO MENTION OF AN ORGANIZED ELECTION BOYCOTT BY REFORMISTS. WOMEN'S RIGHTS ACTIVIST LANGEROUDI TOLD IRPOFFS THAT SHE WOULD NOT VOTE. ASKED ABOUT VETTING OF CANDIDATES FOR THE MUNICIPAL

COUNCIL ELECTIONS, MOMENI CONFIRMED THAT CANDIDATES ARE BEING VETTED BY THE MAJLES, RATHER THAN THE GUARDIAN COUNCIL OR THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR. (NOTE: IRANIAN DOMESTIC PRESS REPORTS INDICATE THAT MUNICIPAL COUNCIL CANDIDATES ARE BEING VETTED BY A MAJLES-APPOINTED "CENTRAL COMMITTEE FOR MONITORING COUNCIL ELECTIONS." AS OF NOVEMBER 29, NO NAMES OR FIGURES HAVE BEEN RELEASED REGARDING QUALIFICATION OF MUNICIPAL CANDIDATES. ENDNOTE)

INCREASED RESTRICTIONS PLACED ON ACTIVISTS

8.(S/NF) THE ACTIVISTS NOTED INCREASED LIMITATIONS ON ACTIVISTS (ALTHOUGH THEY NOTABLY DEFLECTED QUESTIONS ABOUT WHETHER THEY EXPECTED REPERCUSSIONS FOR THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE MIT CONFERENCE). CITING A PERSONAL EXAMPLE, AGHAJARI SAID THAT DIRECTORS OF ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS ARE USUALLY CHOSEN BY THE DEPARTMENT STAFF, BUT WHEN HE WAS CHOSEN TO HEAD THE HISTORY DEPARTMENT, THE GOVERNMENT-APPOINTED PRESIDENT OF THE UNIVERSITY INTERVENED AND APPOINTED SOMEONE ELSE. AGHAJARI ALSO NOTED A FREE SPEECH RALLY HELD IN LATE NOVEMBER BY STUDENTS AT TEHRAN UNIVERSITY, SAYING THAT HE WAS PREVENTED FROM SPEAKING AT THAT EVENT, BUT OTHERS SPOKE ON HIS BEHALF. (NOTE: SEE REFTEL FOR MORE ON INTERFERENCE BY THE GOVERNMENT IN UNIVERSITY AFFAIRS. ENDNOTE)

IRAN'S DISAPPOINTED REFORMISTS

9.(S/NF) STUDENT ACTIVIST MOMENI, WHO DESCRIBED HIS OWN FIVE YEAR SUSPENDED SENTENCE FOR HIS POLITICAL ACTIVITIES AND 50 DAYS IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT, DETAILED REFORMISTS' DISAPPOINTMENT WITH PRESIDENT KHATAMI. MOMENI DID NOTE, HOWEVER, THAT MANY PROTEST LEADERS WERE RELEASED FROM PRISON DURING KHATAMI'S PRESIDENCY. HE SAID STUDENT SUPPORT FOR KHATAMI IN THE 1997 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PLAYED A LARGE ROLE IN HIS ELECTORAL SUCCESS. KHATAMI HAD TREMENDOUS POTENTIAL TO BRING ABOUT REFORM, BUT HE DISAPPOINTED HIS SUPPORTERS AND SIDED WITH THE GOVERNMENT. THE STUDENTS WITHDREW THEIR SUPPORT FOR KHATAMI IN THE 2001 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION BECAUSE OF HIS INABILITY TO STAND UP TO THE GOVERNMENT. NONETHELESS, MANY STILL REGARD KHATAMI AS OPEN-MINDED AND A TRUE INTELLECTUAL, IN CONTRAST TO AHMADINEJAD OR RAFSANJANI, MOMENI SAID.

10.(S/NF) COMMENT: IT IS NOTEWORTHY THAT EVEN AMONG IRANIANS WHO ARE CRITICAL OF THEIR GOVERNMENT, THERE IS STILL SKEPTICISM OF THE MOTIVATIONS OF FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS AND A FEAR OF FOREIGN INTERVENTION. AMONG IRANIANS, THIS SKEPTICISM HAS HISTORICALLY BEEN DIRECTED TOWARD RUSSIA AND GREAT BRITAIN, BUT ALSO EXTENDS TO THE US, AS THE MENTION OF THE 1953 COUP AGAINST MOSSADEQ INDICATES. IT IS ALSO INTERESTING THAT A PERSON SUCH AS

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AGHAJARI, WHO HAS BEEN PERSECUTED AND IMPRISONED BY THE CLERICAL GOVERNMENT FOR HIS VIEWS OF ISLAM, CONTINUES TO ADVOCATE FOR A ROLE FOR RELIGION WITHIN A FUTURE DEMOCRATIC IRAN.

11.(S/NF) COMMENT CONTINUED: MEMBERS OF THE GROUP WERE RELUCTANT TO ENGAGE ON THE TOPIC OF POSSIBLE REPERCUSSIONS FOR THEIR PARTICIPATION IN THE MIT CONFERENCE. AGHAJARI AND MOMENI DISMISSED THE QUESTION, CLAIMING THEY HAD NOT THOUGHT MUCH ABOUT IT. AGHAJARI SAID SIMPLY THAT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO PREDICT THE BEHAVIOR OF AHMADINEJAD'S GOVERNMENT. THEIR RELUCTANCE MAY HAVE BEEN DUE TO CONCERNS THAT THEIR RESPONSES WOULD AFFECT THEIR VISA APPLICATIONS BUT BEARS MENTIONING NONETHELESS.

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